

JAN. 5TH, 1856.—We are going to Kansas.

Memoirs From A Meatless Utopia:

The Failed Local Vegetarianism of Miriam Colt's *Went To Kansas*

By Hallie Lucas

January 5th, 1856 -- “We are going to Kansas.” These words, more than a century and a half old, still carry the weight of anticipation and the promise of a new land. This sentence opens the first chapter of Miriam Davis Colt’s first-hand memoir of her participation in the unsuccessful attempt to establish a vegetarian utopia in Kansas territory, entitled *Went to Kansas: Being a Thrilling Account of an Ill-Fated Expedition to that Fairy Land, and its Sad Results*. Published in 1817, *Went to Kansas* reflects in diary form about the idealist vegetarian settlement on a plot of land near the Neosho

River in southeastern Kansas, where members might be freed of all earthly temptations—particularly the consumption of animal flesh. Colt and her family pursued this reform venture with heartrendingly high hopes, and tragic results. In what follows, I explore the journey of both Miriam Davis Colt's family and her novel, *Went to Kansas*, the latter making its way from a New York printing house to Kansas State Libraries.

Considering today's reputation of Kansas, we do not immediately associate the sunflower state's founding with vegetarianism. The Kansas Emigration Company was founded in 1856 as an attempt to expand vegetarian ideals to the Kansas territory. The idea was dreamed up by Henry S. Clubb, a British immigrant and ardent abolitionist journalist. At the time, Clubb was serving as president of the American Vegetarian Society, a role that allowed him to powerfully promote and garner interest in the meatless settlement.¹ The first meeting of the Kansas Emigration Company took place in 1855, in which a joint-stock principle was proposed where each member would purchase shares towards the construction of the settlement.² Clubb's plans included four square miles of land, geometrically arranged into an "Octagonal Community." In this setup Clubb following the work of Orson Squire Fowler, whose designs spurred the eighteenth-century obsession with octagon or eight-angled homes. The octagon home, so Fowler's argument, was not only the most efficient way to build, allowing for the

¹ Henry S. Clubb immigrated to the U.S. around 1850, bringing with him the ideals of the Swedenborgian Church of England. An offshoot of the group were the "Cowherdites", a religious sect that practiced vegetarianism in accordance with religious principles. Millington, Karen. "*Vegetarian Roots: the Extraordinary Tale of William Cowherd*," BBC News, 17 December 2012. The Kansas Emigration Company was advertised in the New York Tribune through connections of the American Vegetarian Society, gaining popularity with members of the society located in the New York area. We can assume it is through these channels that Miriam Davis Colt and her family became involved with Emigration Company. For a first hand account of the discovery of the emigration by close friends of the Colts, see: Watson and Elizabeth Stewart, *Section 4: Vegetarian Settlement Company*, Kansas Collection Articles, http://www.kancoll.org/articles/stewart/ws_section04.htm (May 1857).

² The company plan of operations can be found laid out in the introduction to Miriam Davis Colt's novel, as sent forth by shareholders from the directors of the company. Dated December, 1855.

reduction of material and promoting a better flow of light and air into the building. Clubb's vision for the vegetarian settlement featured accordingly eight radial roads converging on a central octagonal headquarter, with the outlying segments divided into farms. The central headquarter would provide incoming settlers with comfortable shelter, so the idea, while the newcomers would establish their farmsteads. During this first meeting, a company agent by the name of Dr. John McLauren was elected to scout an optimal location for such a settlement.

McLauren returned in January of 1856, with a proposed site of settlement on the banks of the Neosho River, just west of Fort Scott, Kansas. Thus, the first group of 108 settlers began their expedition to Kansas in March of that year, followed by a similar sized company in April that included the Colt family.

Miriam and her husband William, along with their two children, sold their farm in upstate New York and purchased shares in the promising new vegetarian enterprise. They were enticed by proclamations of the bounty and beauty of Kansas and of the surety of success which the company settlement would provide. They left New York in April of 1856, journeying by train and then steamboat to Kansas City. Here they set out by wagon train to reach the new settlement on the banks of the Neosho River.³ Company agents reported the location as promising, allowing for the construction of a mill as well as an abundance of valuable timber, coal, and limestone. Colt reports that fellow settlers

³ Company agent Dr. John McLaurin scouted this area prior to departure, calling it "the best location for the Vegetarian Settlement." He took possession of a claim "comprising excellent water privileges...sufficiently abundant to make it serviceable for mill-power... there is sufficient amount of timber to serve the purposes of settlers... coal, limestone, sandstone and abundant springs of pure water are interspersed throughout a fine rolling prairie, and the land comprises excellent vegetable mould. The scenery is beautiful, and the surface undulating like the waves of the ocean subsiding after a storm." Vegetarian settlers highly anticipated the professed abundant resources on their beautiful future home.

accompanied the departure in high spirits, singing “Ho brothers! Come brothers! Hasten all with me, we’ll sing upon the Kansas plain, the song of liberty!”

In May, Colt records her regret. She ponders cryptically upon arrival, “Disappointment lurks in many a prize.” Their discoveries arriving at the Kansas location were dismal: the saw and grist mill had not been built as promised, neither were temporary lodgings for the newly arrived travelers ready. Worse, supplies among the camp were sparse. Company members resided in shanty tents made of tree bark. Many families as quickly departed the camp as they had arrived, realizing the original promises were unlikely to fulfill. But Colt and her family stayed. They chose to battle the hardships of the land—exposure, disease, rattlesnakes, and lack of necessary supplies. Their determination to found a new home in an unruly and unpredictable land is nothing short of admirable. Kansas at the time was a wild unknown, and the Colt needed to build their new lives from the ground up.

Many Neosho Native Americans travelled in and out of the area surrounding the vegetarian community. They often left for extended periods of time to hunt buffalo on the prairie. Colt writes extensively about encounters with the Neosho, she observes their customs and ponders about indigenous spiritual and medical traditions. In fact, a previous owner of our copy of *Went to Kansas* was the historian E. G. Phelps. Clearly fascinated by Neosho culture, Phelps left rich marginalia alongside Colt’s descriptions of encounters with Native Americans. As a matter of fact, the inside-cover of our copy still bears Phelps faintly penciled signature as well as a list of pages cataloguing his interests. All page numbers point to accounts by Colt on Native American life and invasive white settlers. Colt describes, for example, an abandoned Neosho village, noting that she “came to the ruins of a city of Indian wigwams, long since untenanted. We saw no

obelisks crumbling away- no sculptured marble broken- no granite walls tumbling down- no relict of dome, turret, or spire- but the rude dilapidation pictured the undeveloped mechanism of the red man, his poverty of tools, and want of knowledge to use them.” She recounts indigenous methods of building wigwams, drawing a stark contrast between their way of life and her own. And she recognizes that while Neosho villages might seem somewhat rudimentary, they are surviving much better than her own family. “I feel that here I am in the charnel house of the red men’s bones! For all around can be seen the monuments of the Indian’s graves,” she observes. Colt witnesses a native burial ceremony with a mixture of admiration and fear. She writes, “If it is an Indian of note, his pony is slain, and it, and all that belongs to him, share with him his grave, and with him- his heaven.” Her no question biased accounts provide rare documentations on the customs of the Neosho tribe. Phelps clearly used Colt’s records to understand the relationship between American settlers and native people during a time of rapid westward expansion.

Colt approached her fear of the Neosho tribe much the same way she approached the unsettled plains. She respected the power they held over her fate of over those she loved. The Colt family stayed in the Kansas territory for several months, attempting to establish themselves despite unexpected difficulties. They attempted to brave this new world, but every day Colt’s distress becomes more pronounced in her diary entries. Often she writes about the beauty and magic of this new “fairy land.” Increasingly, however, she includes ominous dreams that plague her. “We are a doomed ship,” she worries, “unless we go away, some great calamity will come upon us.” The family is beset by fear of their remoteness, their vulnerability towards Indian attacks, and their

sickness that almost destroys them. Miriam begins to pray daily for the courage to return home.

Her journal entries recall the daily trials suffered by early settlers, her own struggles exacerbated by her family's meatless diet. While the Colt's venture to Kansas was a vegetarian colony, many other families were at the same time moving westward in pursuit of their ideas of freedom. The Colt's journey began in April of 1856, just five years prior to the Civil War, and amid the periodic violent conflicts typical along the Kansas-Missouri border. In that sense *Went to Kansas* belongs to a genre of memoirs characteristic to the nineteenth century American Midwest, telling the story of hardy pioneers, willing to combat hardships in a fight for social justice or land ownership.

Clearly this focus on local Kansas is why Colt's first edition copy has survived in Hale Library's special collection. When E.G. Phelps acquired this copy of *Went to Kansas* in the 1950s, it was almost a century old. We know that Phelps donated the novel to a used bookstore in November of 1952, where it was sold for \$5. A year later, it went into public circulation, where it stayed until it was acquired by Kansas State University Special Collections (date unknown). The material wear of the book makes its significant use evident. The spine is disconnected from the cover, pages are loose—the volume shows that it has been well loved. *Went to Kansas* was published in Watertown, New York six years after Miriam Davis Colt's return. Her family left the Kansas settlement four months after their arrival in September. They had hoped to outrun the sickness that plagued the vegetarian community, but Miriam's husband and son succumbed to sickness and died halfway through their return journey.⁴ Colt and her

⁴ In an attempt to combat sickness, the family belies their vegetarian diet and hunts fowl for sustenance. Colt observes this with cool detachment, writing "I was quite a change in diet for us."

daughter Mema are aided by the kindness of people along the way, and eventually return to her brother's place in Michigan. Here she uses her husband's life insurance money to begin a new life. She purchases land, builds a home and livestock, and invests the remainder of the money. Colt stays in touch with members of the vegetarian community, and receives word that the company director, Henry S. Clubb, has made his way "quietly out of the [Kansas] territory."⁵

Colt hoped to sustain herself and her daughter by means of interest accrued on her investment, but the bank defaulted on their payments and her small farmstead fell into debt. She had kept a faithful account of their journey to and from Kansas and decided to publish her memoir in hopes of securing additional income. She succeeds in publishing with L. Ingalls and Co, out of Watertown, New York, in 1862. *Went to Kansas* was thus born. The copy located in special collection belongs to the first and only run of Colt's book. The publisher Lotus Ingalls was an ardent Republican abolitionist. He purchased the *New York Reformer* in the 1820s and began to publish news as an agent of social reform and public interest.⁶ Ingalls was massively successful and nearly quadrupled the readership of his paper. Its motto, "The greatest good to the greatest number," encompassed the subjects of animal welfare and vegetarianism, as well. Ingalls took an interest in advocating for better agricultural practices and the treatment of animals. No question, this interest in animal welfare motivated his publication of Colt's vegetarian memoir. In the mid-nineteenth century, the United States experienced a surge of social reform and vegetarianism and respect for animals pushed questions of equality and natural rights like the rights of women and slaves.

⁵ Henry S. Clubb abandoned his utopia, unable to repay investors and realize the dream of his vegetarian, octagon community.

⁶ H. B. Pierce and Samuel Durant. *History of Jefferson County New York*. L.H. Everts and Co., Philadelphia, 1878.

These social reform movements were also spurred by the Industrial Revolution, and correspondingly, widely available, relatively cheap print culture.

As a matter of fact, the Industrial Revolution massively transformed American print and publishing industries. In unprecedented numbers books became available to all classes of people. Two processes in particular radically altered the printing world: the implementation of steam-powered presses and the rotary type. Replacing flat bed printing processes with a roll of revolving type allowed printers to produce hundreds of sheets a day. Printing houses were able to quickly and inexpensively print books. Probably our first edition of *Went to Kansas* was printed in such manner. The book's yellowed pages indicate acid corrosion characteristic to the aging of inexpensive paper used in revolving type imprints.⁷

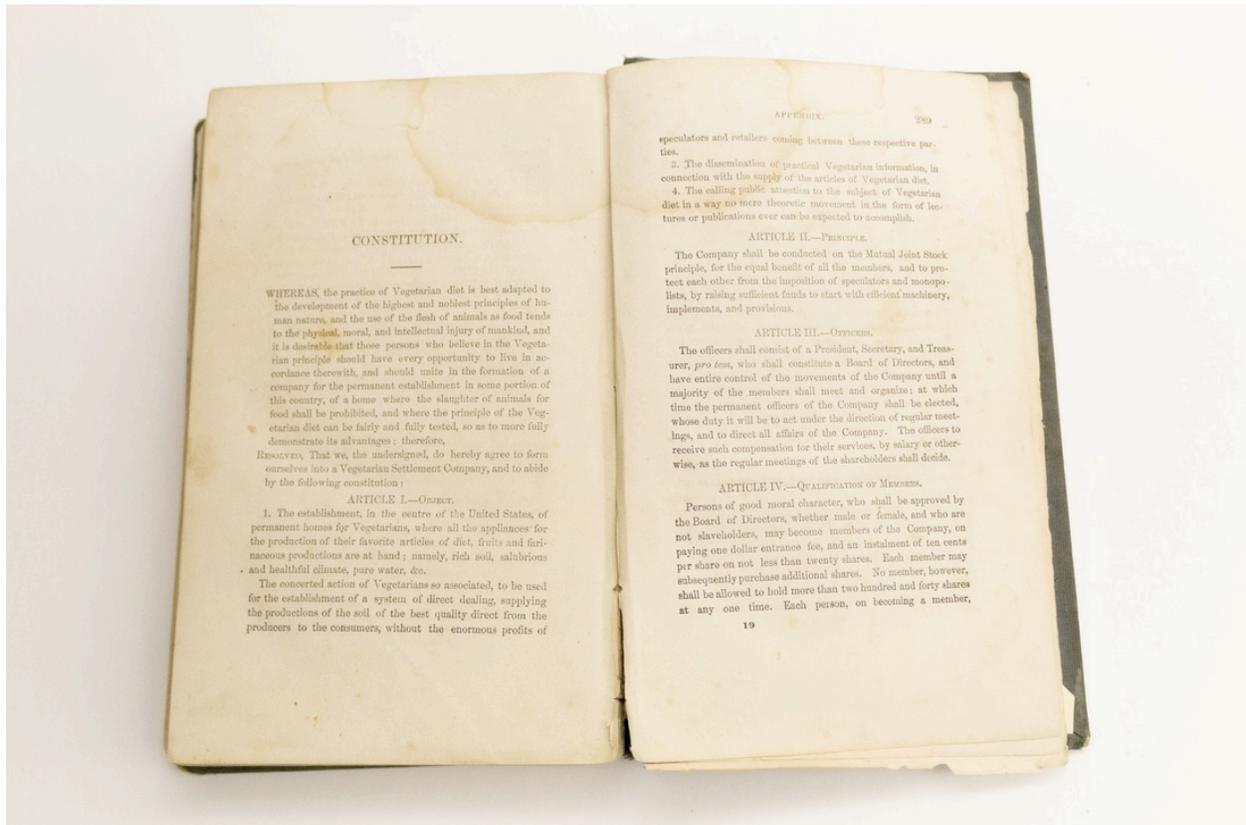
New printing innovations changed the audience for which books were published. Likewise minority authors, women like Colt for example, entered print culture. Printing houses were no longer forced to print only the most commercially popular material to make a profit. This shift empowered Colt and offered her the opportunity to share her struggles, dreams, and dietary opinions with the world. Her memoir, a last attempt at financial security, reminds of the trials and tribulations suffered by those vegetarian pioneers who came to Kansas in pursuit of an elusive dream. *Went to Kansas* documents the singular bravery and perseverance that define the American Midwest.

⁷ The Industrial Revolution encouraged renovation in all aspects of production, and as a result printers replaced high quality rag paper with a cheaper product made of wood pulp. Both rag and wood pulp paper are made out of organic, plant-based fibers, but the chemical composition differs significantly between the two materials. Wood pulp papers contain organic molecules that acidify and deteriorate the paper: a process of self-destruction that ultimately browns and embrittles the pages. This is the case for *Went to Kansas*, so much so that the cover page fell out of the book entirely, and has been replaced by a library printed version.

CHAPTER I.

ANTICIPATIONS AND PREPARATIONS.

“Bring the sickle, speed the plough,
Turn the ready sail;
Freedom is the noblest pay
For the true man’s toil.
Ho! brothers! come brothers!
Hasten all with me,
We’ll sing upon the hunter’s plain
A song of liberty.”



CONSTITUTION.

WHEREAS, the practice of Vegetarian diet is best adapted to the development of the highest and noblest principles of human nature, and the use of the flesh of animals as food tends to the physical, moral, and intellectual injury of mankind, and it is desirable that those persons who believe in the Vegetarian principle should have every opportunity to live in accordance therewith, and should unite in the formation of a company for the permanent establishment in some portion of this country, of a home where the slaughter of animals for food shall be prohibited, and where the principle of the Vegetarian diet can be fairly and fully tested, so as to more fully demonstrate its advantages; therefore,
RESOLVED, That we, the undersigned, do hereby agree to form ourselves into a Vegetarian Settlement Company, and to abide by the following constitution:

ARTICLE I.—OBJECT.

1. The establishment, in the centre of the United States, of permanent homes for Vegetarians, where all the appliances for the production of their favorite articles of diet, fruits and farinaceous productions are at hand; namely, rich soil, salubrious and healthful climate, pure water, &c.

The concerted action of Vegetarians so associated, to be used for the establishment of a system of direct dealing, supplying the productions of the soil of the best quality direct from the producers to the consumers, without the enormous profits of

APPENDIX.

speculators and retailers coming between these respective parties.

3. The dissemination of practical Vegetarian information, in connection with the supply of the articles of Vegetarian diet.

4. The calling public attention to the subject of Vegetarian diet in a way so more theoretic movement in the form of lectures or publications ever can be expected to accomplish.

ARTICLE II.—PRINCIPLE.

The Company shall be conducted on the Mutual Joint Stock principle, for the equal benefit of all the members, and to protect each other from the imposition of speculators and monopolists, by raising sufficient funds to start with efficient machinery, implements, and provisions.

ARTICLE III.—OFFICERS.

The officers shall consist of a President, Secretary, and Treasurer, *pro tem*, who shall constitute a Board of Directors, and have entire control of the movements of the Company until a majority of the members shall meet and organize; at which time the permanent officers of the Company shall be elected, whose duty it will be to act under the direction of regular meetings, and to direct all affairs of the Company. The officers to receive such compensation for their services, by salary or otherwise, as the regular meetings of the shareholders shall decide.

ARTICLE IV.—QUALIFICATION OF MEMBERS.

Persons of good moral character, who shall be approved by the Board of Directors, whether male or female, and who are not slaveholders, may become members of the Company, on paying one dollar entrance fee, and an instalment of ten cents per share on not less than twenty shares. Each member may subsequently purchase additional shares. No member, however, shall be allowed to hold more than two hundred and forty shares at any one time. Each person, on becoming a member,